

*The Rape of Europa by
Martin de Vos in the collection
of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum*



Lieneke Nijkamp

**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum possesses perhaps the most elegant painting ever executed by sixteenth-century Flemish artist Maerten de Vos [fig. 1]. In one sweeping diagonal, a beautiful naked young woman fills the centre of the picture. Despite her twisted and seemingly rather precarious pose, she radiates a certain calm, perhaps a resigned submission to her imminent fate. The dramatically billowing mantle dominates one quarter of the image and frames the delicate features of the maiden's face. As the young girl serenely glances backwards over her shoulder to a pastoral scene in the left background, she at once holds firmly onto the bull's horns. It is difficult to say whether we are witnessing a brutal abduction or the divine elopement of a mythical woman. That we are witness, however, is affirmed by the piercing eye of the sturdy white bull who meets our gaze¹.

"Among those who have made Antwerp famous..."²

The artist who executed this masterpiece was Maerten de Vos [fig. 2], a leading Antwerp artist of the late sixteenth century who was a prolific oil painter as well as draughtsman and print designer³. Little is known about his early life. He was born in 1532, the youngest of the four children of Maerten de Vos the Elder and Anna de Heer, and he presumably received his first training in his father's workshop. In 1552 De Vos left Antwerp for his "obligatory" journey to Italy to further his training as an artist. It is assumed that the young artist traveled together with Pieter Brueghel I⁴, but—unlike his travel companion—De Vos did not leave us any topographical drawings with which to verify his Italian sojourn. Instead, we can only rely on such secondary sources as Karel van Mander, who wrote that the artist traveled to Rome, Venice "and other places"⁵.

1 I am very grateful to Abigail Newman for her critical reading of this contribution and her helpful suggestions.

2 Karel van Mander. *Het schilder-boeck, vol. 1, part. 3 : Het leven der doorluchtighe Nederlandsche, en Hooghduytsche Schilders*. Haerlem : Passchier van Westbusch, 1604, fol. 264.

3 For the life and career of Maerten de Vos, see Zweite 1980 and Schellenberg 2012.

4 This is based on two letters sent by Scipio Fabius from Bologna to the Antwerp cartographer Abraham Ortelius in 1561 and 1565 in which the former inquires after both artists and urges the latter to greet them. Zweite 1980, p. 21, note 14, p. 22, note 23; Popham 1931, p. 188.

5 Karel van Mander, *op. cit.*, fols. 264-265; De Vos may have traveled through Bologna and although no records attest to a stop in Florence, this is assumed and also very likely. Zweite 1974, p. 27.



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1. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
The Rape of Europa, early 1570s
Oil on panel, 133.7 x 174.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/241

Carlo Ridolfi included Maerten de Vos as one of the few foreigners in his 1648 biography of Venetian painters. According to Ridolfi the artist even assisted Tintoretto in his workshop as a landscape painter, although none of this work is known to us today⁶.

After several years Maerten de Vos returned to Antwerp. In 1558 he enrolled as a master in the Antwerp guild of Saint Luke⁷, and two years later he married Joanna Le Boucq. As a master painter De Vos was allowed to establish his own workshop, and in 1564 he registered his first pupil, Balten Vlierden, with the guild⁸. Although De Vos would eventually have one of the largest workshops in Antwerp, at that moment he was still relatively unknown. Two important commissions at the end of the 1560s were responsible for his breakthrough. In 1568 De Vos executed a series of five paintings with scenes from the life of Saint Paul the Apostle [fig. 3] for the wealthy Antwerp merchant Gillis Hooftman. Around the same time, William the Younger, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, commissioned De Vos to decorate his palace chapel in Celle. De Vos carried out both ambitious works successfully, adding to his prestige. Nonetheless, the unstable political and economic situation in the 1570s, owing to the ongoing conflict between Spain and the Southern Netherlands, did not make life easy for Antwerp citizens.

As one of the most important European centres of commerce and the arts, Antwerp had been attracting merchants, artists and intellectuals for several decades. The Habsburgs had controlled the Southern Netherlands since the end of the fifteenth century, and—although their reign was Catholic—other religions had been tolerated. Philip II (1527-1598), however, was determined to defend the Catholic faith by fighting against the Protestant Reformation and persecuting Calvinists within his foreign territories. His campaign culminated in the iconoclastic protests in 1566 and the Dutch Revolt in 1568, which marked the beginning of the Eighty Years War. Antwerp was subsequently ruled alternately by the Spanish and by the revolting Protestants. When a Calvinist city council was elected in 1581, the removal of images continued during a period known as the “Silent Iconoclasm”. Finally, the Spanish army successfully besieged Antwerp and returned it to the control of Catholic Spain in 1585, forcing all protestant citizens to either leave town or convert.

Maerten de Vos is known to have been Lutheran, but since he decided to stay in Antwerp, he must have converted. Many other artists fled Antwerp to start a new life elsewhere. Since De Vos already had a large family to support—the last of his eight children had been born in 1576⁹—emigration could hardly have seemed the self-evident course¹⁰. The artist had also been appointed under-deacon (*onderdeken*) of the Guild of Saint Luke in 1571 and upper-deacon (*opperdeken*) the year after, and his career had taken off with several large commissions¹¹. Instead of leaving Antwerp, De Vos chose a different strategy to survive and, like many other artists, diversified his professional activity by supplying numerous print designs for book illustrations¹². His pragmatism also resulted in the ironic fact that the once Lutheran artist whose career was established by Protestant patrons would eventually benefit from the Catholic revival and gain most fame by replacing the many lost and destroyed retables of the guild altars in Antwerp. From 1574 until his death in 1603 Maerten de Vos would execute a large number of these altarpieces, concluding his career with a prestigious commission from his own guild for the *Saint Luke painting the Madonna* of 1602 [fig. 4].

6 Ridolfi 1914-1924, vol. 2, pp. 81, 83-84.

7 Rombouts/Van Lierus 1961, p. 209.

8 Ibid., p. 232.

9 Van den Branden 1883, vol. 1, pp. 255-256.

10 For the subject of artist's migration from the Southern Netherlands in the late sixteenth-century, I would like to refer to the research conducted by D. van der Linden for the project “Cultural Transmission and Artistic Exchanges in the Low Countries, 1572-1672.”

11 Rombouts/Van Lierus 1961, pp. 243, 245.

12 Vermeylen 2012, p. 100.



2. Aegidius Sadeler (1570-1629), after Joseph Heintz the Elder (1564-1609)
 Portrait of Maerten de Vos at 60, c. 1593
 Engraving on copper, 28.8 x 23 cm
 Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp
 Inv. no. PK.OP.16457

The turbulent times during which De Vos forged his career had an impact on the type of commissions he received and also left a mark on his style, which I will address further on. Although the artist executed very few mythological paintings during his career, after 1585 religious commissions certainly dominate his production¹³. When considering the Bilbao painting within De Vos's oeuvre, it is thus interesting to notice that most of his mythological work can be placed in the 1570s, and at least before 1585¹⁴. The exception is *Apollo and the muses*, dated by Armin Zweite in the 1590s, but this painting can in fact also be interpreted as an allegory of peace¹⁵.

After the Council of Trent (1545-1563), artists had to abide by certain rules. The most radical voice on the question of images in the Southern Netherlands was the theologian Johannes Molanus (1533-1585). He is best known for turning the Tridentine decrees into instructions for artists¹⁶. His treatise on sacred images was first published in 1570 and would have a strong impact on the arts. Although the Catholic Church had been mostly concerned with imagery in an ecclesiastical setting, there was a reaction against large images from classical mythology and the painted nude in general was placed under attack. Molanus, for instance,

¹³ Zweite 1980, p. 199.

¹⁴ See also De Clippel 2012, p. 64.

¹⁵ Zweite 1980, pp. 301-302, no. 81.

¹⁶ Johannes Molanus. *De Picturis et Imaginibus Sacris, pro vero earum usu contra abusum*. Louvain, 1570. See Freedberg 1971; Jonckheere 2012, pp. 35-36.



3. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Saint Paul in Ephesus, 1568
 Oil on panel, 125 x 198 cm
 Musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels
 Inv. no. 4310

was somewhat stricter than other Catholic writers in that he also targeted indecency in profane images. And if anything was considered indecent, it was the nude. Karolien de Clippel has noted that, among De Vos's painted oeuvre, subjects that allow for a female nude, such as those of Susanna and Eve and classical myths, can all be dated before 1585¹⁷. Although De Vos would continue depicting the naked female body in his many print designs (for instance with the series of the Four Seasons and the Seven Planets)¹⁸, he seems to have abandoned the large-scale painted nude after about the time of the publication of Molanus's treatise¹⁹. Furthermore, the fact that Molanus had attacked the nude in private space cut both ways, as it resulted in a market decline in paintings displaying the sensuous female bodies²⁰.

Not only the type of commissions and choice of subject-matter differ between De Vos's early and later works; the artist's style also seems to have changed accordingly. Hans Vlieghe has aptly summarized this change: De Vos's early works were carried out in a distinctly Mannerist style—with sharply receding backgrounds and elongated figures in distorted poses—deriving from Venetian and Tusco-Roman examples and indebted to his illustrious contemporary Frans Floris. His later work, however, shows a more tempered Mannerism combined with a descriptive style more in line with Netherlandish tradition. This new style was better suited to strict post-Tridentine ideas about how a subject-matter should be rendered and thus more fitting for altarpieces²¹.

17 Besides the Bilbao painting, De Clippel refers to *Hercules's Choice* (dated by Zweite first half 1570s), *Venus and Adonis* (dated by Zweite mid-1570s) and *Ceres and the Four Elements* (dated 1584). De Clippel 2012, p. 64, note 39.

18 For Maerten de Vos's print designs, see Hollstein 1995-1996.

19 De Clippel 2012, pp. 67-69.

20 Freedberg 2012, p. 39.

21 Vlieghe 1998, p. 13.



4. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Saint Luke Painting the Madonna, 1602
 Oil on panel, 270 x 217 cm
 Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium
 Inv. no. 88

The Bilbao painting does not seem to be dated, although a 1916 auction catalogue claims that De Vos signed and dated the painting by means of the gold thread in Europa's garment ("1572. Fecit Merten de Vos")²². Unfortunately, this inscription is no longer visible today. B.H.M. Mutsaers and Ana Sánchez-Lassa date the painting to about 1590 on stylistic grounds but without specifying why it should be situated in the artist's later period²³. Zweite argues—and I would agree—that the painting should be dated to the 1570s, taking not only the subject-matter and style but also the political context of the period into account.

The sharp-outlined contours and smooth rendering of the nude in the Bilbao painting are comparable to De Vos's later work, but already appear in some of his work of the 1570s, particularly in the central panel of the

22 Hôtel des commissaires-priseurs, Marseille, 7 November 1916, p. 22, lot 70: "La signature: 1572. Fecit Merten de Vos, est formée par les broderies d'or du tapis recouvrant le taureau."

23 Mutsaers 1963, p. 63; Ana Sánchez-Lassa in note dated 1998 in the museum's curatorial files.



5. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Last Judgement, 1570
 Oil on panel, 263 x 262 cm
 Seville Fine Arts Museum
 Inv. no. CE0053P

Saint Thomas triptych of 1574²⁴. The fuller, rounder female torso also evokes the 1570 Seville *Last Judgement* [fig. 5]. Later nude female figures, such as the 1584 Ceres [fig. 6] and the female personifications in De Vos's 1590s print designs, have a different body type. The stylized profile head of Europa and her intricate hairdo are also typical of De Vos's earlier work and reminiscent of Venetian painting. The same female head type appears, for instance, in the Abraham and Rebecca series painted in 1562 and in *Moses showing the tables of the law to the Israelites* of 1575 [fig. 7]. Other examples of dramatic flowing fabric, as with Europa's cape, are also mainly to be found in De Vos's earlier work²⁵.

24 Oil on canvas. 206,8 x 185,7 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, inv. no. 77; Zweite 1980, cat. 56.

25 I am very grateful to Stephanie Porras for generously sharing her thoughts on the style and dating of the Bilbao painting with me. She is currently working on a book on Maerten de Vos, travel and identity.



6. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Ceres and the Four Elements, 1584
 Oil on canvas, 165 x 237 cm
 San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Madrid
 Inv. no. 556

Beyond questions of style related to dating, the Bilbao painting is an outstanding example of De Vos's engagement with numerous artistic currents. For instance, the impact of Tintoretto, Veronese and Titian on the oeuvre of De Vos throughout his career can be recognized in his Venetian use of colour, strongly horizontal arrangements of figures and sharply receding backgrounds. Titian's *Rape of Europa* [fig. 8], painted for Philip II, has often been invoked in comparison with the Bilbao painting²⁶. Although both compositions are similar in scheme—Europa on the bull in the foreground, maidens in the left background, accompanying putti—Titian's version is much more emotionally charged. The Venetian master leaves no doubt about the terror that comes with rape. The disturbing image of Titian's protagonists—seemingly about to tear through the picture—stands in sharp contrast to the stylized, elegant and rather frozen Europa in the Bilbao painting. Clearly these artists had different ideas on what emotions their work should evoke in the beholder. Whereas Titian must have aimed for raw passion, De Vos seems to have preferred a decorous sensuality instead. The centralized placement of the soft and idealized female body and the composed expression of Europa's face all add to the contemplative and decorative quality of the painting.

Interestingly, aside from the smooth modeling of the flesh and the refined features of Europa's face, Maerten de Vos rendered all that surrounds the female nude with a visible energy. The bull, for instance, is briskly executed and even shows some *impasto* on its forehead. It seems as if the artist deliberately chose

²⁶ It is impossible, however, that Maerten de Vos had seen this painting as Titian started working on the painting in 1559 and by 1562 it had already been shipped to Spain. See also Zweite 1980, p. 169, note 90.



7. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Moses Showing the Tables of the Law to the Israelites, 1575
 Oil on panel, 152 x 238 cm
 Mauritshuis, The Hague. On long-term loan to Museum Catharijneconvent
 Inv. no. 249

to contrast the innocent young woman with the brutal beast by using a different manner of depiction and brushwork. The landscape setting is also executed with somewhat loose brushstrokes recalling Venetian art. Waves are evoked by single but confident strokes of the brush, and De Vos purposely left the brown layer of underpaint visible in some places, for instance along the coastline. The confidence with which De Vos painted this work becomes even more evident when looking at the X-ray and infrared reflectogram images made of the painting [figs. 9 and 10]. The absence of large *pentimenti* and the steady lines of underdrawing of the female nude reveal a determination and steadfastness that one might expect from a young but already experienced artist.

The many fine details in the Bilbao painting bring to mind early Netherlandish painting, most obviously with the flower garlands crisscrossing the bull's back and the frail little vessel in the far right background. Although the large nude figure itself reminds us of such Tintoretto paintings as *Leda and the Swan* and *Danae* [fig. 11], the overall composition seems to follow Netherlandish examples, such as the *Venus Cythereia* by Jan Massys [fig. 12]. This decorative composition scheme of one or several large foreground figures with detailed landscaping in the background is found in other mythological and allegorical works by De Vos including *Venus and Adonis*, *Pax et Iustitia* [fig. 13], *Hercules at the crossroads* and the aforementioned *Ceres*, but also in the animal series he executed in 1572 for Duke Johann Albrecht von Mecklenburg, now in Schwerin. With regard to Northern influences, it is tempting to connect the Bilbao painting, and other work by De Vos for that matter, to the oeuvre of the Haarlem artist Maarten van Heemskerck. Although the



8. Titian (c. 1485/1490-1576)
The Rape of Europa, c. 1560-1562
 Oil on canvas, 178 x 205 cm
 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston
 Inv. no. P26e1

comparison between these two artists—already acknowledged by Karel van Mander in his biography of De Vos—may also be the result of both Netherlandish artists using common visual models from Italy instead of any direct influence²⁷.

Besides Venetian and Netherlandish influence on style and composition, the Bilbao painting is also indebted to the work of Tusco-Roman painters like Vasari and the School of Raphael²⁸. The small figure of Mercury in the upper left [fig. 14] strongly resembles one of the Mercury figures in a print series executed in the 1530s by Agostino Veneziano and the Master of the Die [fig. 15]²⁹. This series of 32 numbered engravings narrates the story of Cupid and Psyche. Number 29 illustrates the episode in which Cupid begs Jupiter to have mercy on Psyche, and Mercury hurries off to assemble the gods³⁰. Even though De Vos changed the placement of the *caduceus* from within Mercury's upper hand to his lower and remodeled the mantle, the resemblance is striking. The engravings were probably executed after a series of designs by Michiel Coxcie and are linked

27 Silver 1984, pp. 276-277.

28 Zweite 1980, p. 168; Freedberg 2012, p. 44.

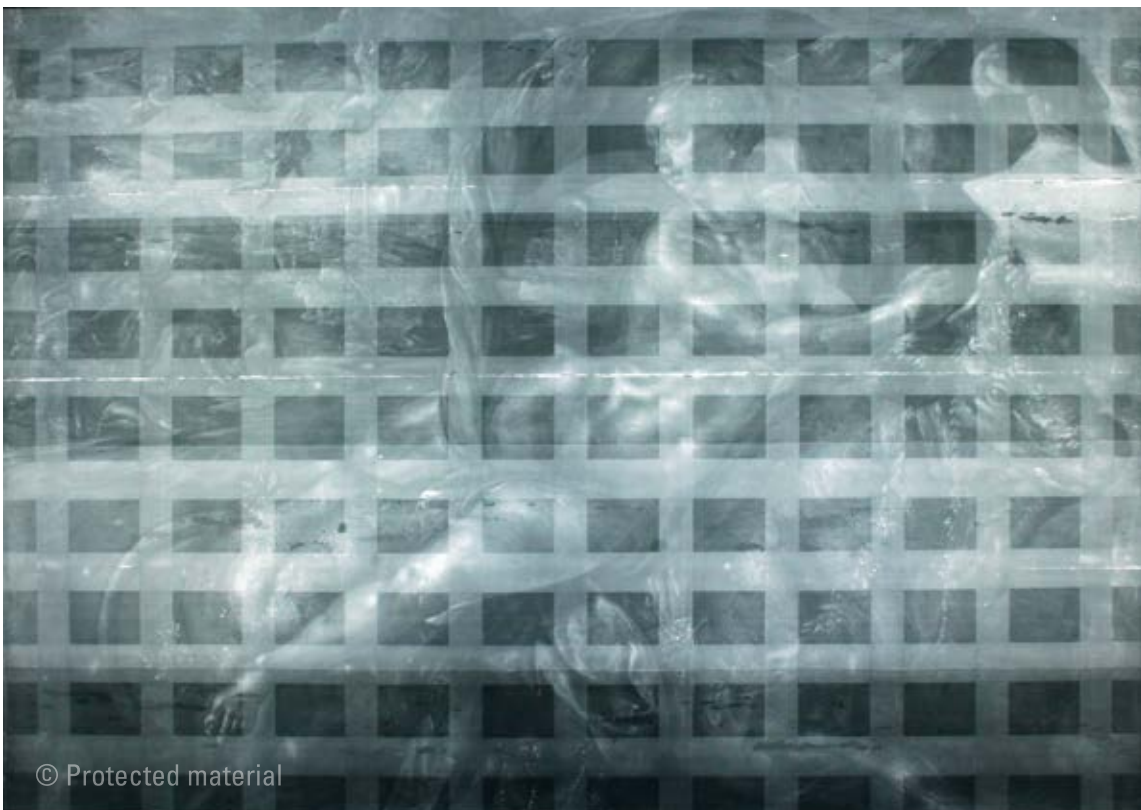
29 Here I would like to thank Koenraad Jonckheere for pointing out this comparison.

30 The series consists of thirty three unnumbered plates, but a drastically reworked state consists of thirty two numbered engravings. Van Grieken 2013, p. 159. For plate no. 29, see Boorsch 1982, p. 223, no. 67.



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9. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
The Rape of Europa, early 1570s
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
X-ray



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10. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
The Rape of Europa, early 1570s
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Infrared reflectography



11. Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti) (1518-1594)
Danae, second half of 16th century
Oil on canvas, 142 x 182.5 cm
Musée des beaux-arts, Lyon, France
Inv. no. A91



12. Jan Massys (1509-1575)
Venus Cythereia, 1561
Oil on panel, 130 x 156 cm
Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
Inv. no. NM 507



13. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Pax et Iustitia, c. 1575
Oil on panel, 118 x 174.5 cm
Hermitage State Museum, St. Petersburg
Inv. no. 7724



14. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
The Rape of Europa, early 1570s
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail



15. Master of the Die (active c. 1525-1560), after Michiel Coxcie (1499-1592)
The Legend of Cupid and Psyche. Plate 29: Cupid Pleads with Jupiter to Spare Psyche, with Mercury on the Left, 1530s
 Engraving, 19.5 x 23 cm
 British Museum, London
 Inv. no. M,44.60

with Raphael's decorations for the Loggia de Psiche in the Villa Farnesina in Rome³¹. De Vos must have been inspired by this Raphaellesque model³², whether through the print series or perhaps relying on another common source linked with the designs, since the figure is reversed.³³ The beautifully modeled statue of Neptune in the left background of the Bilbao painting is also evocative of known models, possibly the fountain of the river Nile at the Campidoglio in Rome³⁴. As Koenraad Jonckheere has convincingly argued, it was common practice for sixteenth-century Flemish artists to combine popular pictorial sources from both North and South of the Alps³⁵. These quotations were rearranged and adjusted (*aemulatio*) but were still supposed to be identifiable. The highly affected spiral pose of Europa does not directly relate to any earlier examples with regard to the Europa myth³⁶. Nonetheless, as a *figura serpentinata* it echoes sculptures by Michelangelo, among other Italian examples³⁷. Zweite connects it with the male figure in the lower right corner of one of the few earlier dated drawings by De Vos, the 1573 *Holy Trinity* [fig. 16]³⁸.

Maerten de Vos sought inspiration in earlier and contemporary examples from Italy as well as those from his native land. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint whether the Bilbao painting is most indebted to Tuscan,

31 For the debate on the attribution and the complex history of the designs, see Van Grieken 2013, pp. 159-162.

32 Dacos 1995, p. 27.

33 The print series gained considerable popularity, also as a design for decorative arts. Beautiful examples of its success are the forty four stained glass windows commissioned by the constable Anne de Montmorency and executed between 1542 and 1544, now at Musée Condé in Chantilly. See Garnier 2003, pp. 54-59.

34 Dacos 1995, p. 27.

35 See, for instance, Jonckheere 2013, and by the same author, "Repetition and the genesis of meaning : an introductory note", in Jonckheere 2012, pp. 7-19.

36 For visual examples of the rape of Europa throughout the centuries, see the Warburg Institute Iconographic Database at <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk>.

37 On this subject, see Mauer 2001.

38 Zweite 1980, p. 282; D'Hulst 1968, pp. 505-518.



16. Maerten de Vos (1532-1603)
Holy Trinity, 1573
Pencil and grey ink, and wash with touches
of crayon on brown paper, 42.7 x 33 cm
Albertina, Vienna
Inv. no. 7924

Roman, Venetian or Flemish art, a question which may in any event be beside the point. What the painting powerfully demonstrates, however, is the way in which it is a product of the many international artistic exchanges of De Vos's time³⁹. De Vos's synthetic talents no doubt contributed to his becoming the most influential Flemish pictorial source for painters in Spain and Spanish America before Rubens⁴⁰. Echoes of the Bilbao painting in particular can be found in *The Rape of Europa* by contemporary Gillis Coignet, who in fact spent a large part of his career in Germany [fig. 17].

39 Freedberg 2012, p. 44.

40 Soria 1948, p. 258, no. 4; Estella 1972, pp. 66-71.



17. Gillis Coignet (1542-1599)
The Rape of Europa, 1598
Oil on panel, 76.4 x 96.5 cm
Private collection

Majesty and love do not go well together

The story so elegantly told in this painting is that of the Phoenician princess Europa who was abducted by Jupiter (Zeus)—ruler of the gods—disguised as a bull. The oldest written source for this myth is a reference in Homer's *Iliad* (Book XIV, lines 321-322), although the source most commonly used by artists and most often found among artists' possessions in this period is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*⁴¹:

When Mercury had inflicted this punishment on the girl for her impious words and spirit, he left the land of Pallas behind him, and flew to heaven on outflung pinions. Here his father calls him aside; and not revealing his love affair as the real reason, he says: "My son, always faithful to perform my bidding, delay not, but swiftly in accustomed flight glide down to earth and seek out the land that looks up at your mother's star from the left. The natives call it the land of Sidon. There you are to drive down to the sea-shore the herd of the king's cattle which you will see grazing at some distance on the mountain-side". He spoke, and quickly the cattle were driven from the mountain

41 McGrath 2009, p. 306.

and headed for the shore, as Jove had directed, to a spot where the great king's daughter was accustomed to play in company with her Tyrian maidens. Majesty and love do not go well together, nor tarry long in the same dwelling-place. And so the father and ruler of the gods, who wields in his right hand the three-forked lightning, whose nod shakes the world, laid aside his royal majesty along with his sceptre, and took upon him the form of a bull. In this form he mingled with the cattle, lowed like the rest, and wandered around, beautiful to behold, on the young grass. His colour was white as the untrodden snow, which has not yet been melted by the rainy south-wind. The muscles stood rounded upon his neck, a long dewlap hung down in front; his horns were small, but perfect in shape as if carved by an artist's hand, cleaner and more clear than pearls. His brow and eyes would inspire no fear, and his whole expression was peaceful.

Agenor's daughter looked at him in wondering admiration, because he was so beautiful and friendly. But, although he seemed so gentle, she was afraid at first to touch him. Presently she drew near, and held out flowers to his snow-white lips. The disguised lover rejoiced and, as a foretaste of future joy, kissed her hands. Even so he could scarce restrain his passion. And now he jumps sportively about on the grass, now lays his snowy body down on the yellow sands; and, when her fear has little by little been allayed, he yields his breast for her maiden hands to pat and his horns to entwine with garlands of fresh flowers.

The princess even dares to sit upon his back, little knowing upon whom she rests. The god little by little edges away from the dry land, and sets his borrowed hoofs in the shallow water; then he goes further out and soon is in full flight with his prize on the open ocean. She trembles with fear and looks back at the receding shore, holding fast a horn with one hand and resting the other on the creature's back. And her fluttering garments stream behind her in the wind⁴².

As many artists had done before him, De Vos visualized the moment when Jupiter and Europa are already far ashore. Although much of the above narrative can be recognized in the painting—the bull's white fur, the flower garlands, Europa's gaze towards the receding shore—De Vos was not merely illustrating Ovid. Besides the visual models discussed above, Mutsaers has already pointed out that De Vos probably used various literary sources and combined these with his own interpretation⁴³. P. H. Gommers explored the different origins of this particular myth in his instructive book *Europe. What's in a name*, which thoroughly describes its visual and written heritage⁴⁴. He concludes that Europa was presumably an earth goddess who was venerated prior to the arrival of Greek tribes and later was incorporated into the Greek religion. The Europa myth was subsequently used as a subject by Greek and Roman poets, although of some of these poems only fragments have survived. In the following paragraphs I will consider how various details in the painting relate to different classical sources. Despite Mutsaers's previous treatment of this material—to which I am much indebted—the painting's use of literary sources merits further consideration and elaboration.

Although Europa and the bull dominate the composition, the painting is in fact rich in many small details. What seems to be a bucolic backdrop at first glance is in fact another scene from the story, preceding the actual abduction. We witness the princess bathing and playing with her maidens before Jupiter's appearance. Two of Europa's maidens are carefully arranging flowers in a basket while Europa—scarcely dressed and dipping her left foot in the sea—and two of her other companions gesticulate to Mercury above. The women notice Mercury but are still unaware of the significance of his arrival. This also means that in the

42 Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, Book II, 833-875 (ed., 1977, pp. 119-121).

43 Mutsaers 1963, pp. 63-65.

44 Gommers 2001.

central composition Europa, despite her backward glance, cannot actually see the landscape behind her, which seems to be affirmed by her introspective look. The illustration of different scenes of this particular myth in one composition can also be seen in the (appropriately titled) *Landscape with two scenes of Europa and Zeus*, painted collaboratively by Jan Tilens and Frans Francken II [fig. 18], and the *Rape of Europa* by Veronese [fig. 19]⁴⁵. The Venetian master even illustrated three different scenes of Ovid within one composition. The twofold composition of the Bilbao painting has not always been recognized in the literature. For instance, Zweite wrote that the background scene only corresponds to Europa's companions, who do not seem aware of the abduction, and therefore ignored the fact that each scene takes place within a different part of the story and that Europa herself appears twice within the painting⁴⁶.

When illustrating the story of Europa, many artists traditionally chose either to depict the princess innocently decorating the bull, or the actual abduction with Europa seated on the bull's back. Maerten de Vos is unique in capturing the moment before Jupiter arrives on stage. A pivotal link between the two scenes in this painting is Mercury. The messenger of the Gods has only just driven a small herd of cows relatively near to the princess—as we know from Ovid—but already his eyes fixate on the abduction at sea. We recognize him by his traditional attributes as *Atlantiades*, wearing his winged sandals and helmet and holding his *caduceus*. Ovid is in fact the only classical author who mentions Mercury in connection with the Europa myth⁴⁷. In the *Metamorphoses* Mercury acts as a transition between the stories of Aglauros and Europa, and in a similar way he plays a transitional, unifying role in the painting. Hovering between the two temporally distinct scenes, the figure occupies an awkward spatial position and seems a *fremdkörper* (strange body) in the overall composition. One reason for this small dissonance may be that the artist copied the figure of Mercury from a contemporary design as discussed earlier; another may stem from De Vos's mingling of these discrete moments in a single continuous landscape.

Several classical authors refer to the presence of Europa's companions. With Ovid we learn how they adorn the bull's horns with fresh flowers. However, since De Vos chose to depict the women before Jupiter arrives on stage, he may have been inspired by a different source to have the Tyrian maidens bathe and gather flowers in baskets. Mutsaers noted that the specific detail of flower baskets is only found in an epic poem by Moschos, a bucolic writer from the 2nd century AD⁴⁸. This poem first discusses the activities of the princess and her companions and subsequently elaborates on Europa's basket, which was given to her by descent and had been forged by Vulcan from gold⁴⁹. In the Bilbao painting we can observe that Europa's receptacle at left does indeed differ from the wicker basket used by the women at right. De Vos must have been familiar with this poem since he illustrated such a peculiar detail.

Moschos also refers to Europa's custom of bathing with her companions. De Vos must have relished the opportunity this reference gave him to portray the princess fairly naked in both scenes, since it allowed him to successfully demonstrate his skills in delineating the female body. Although the erotic element of the myth did not escape many artists when depicting Europa, rarely are her bodily forms revealed more lusciously than in this painting. Only a hint of Europa's regal gold-colored gown, embellished with fringes and adorned with pearls, flows from under her lower body and separates most of her naked flesh from the animal. As Europa's nudity is exclusively covered by a flimsy transparent veil and her own right arm, the artist

45 Schaudies 2012, p. 241, cat. 89; McGrath 2009, p. 319.

46 Zweite 1980, p. 169.

47 Mutsaers 1963, p. 63.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

49 See the translation by Thomas Stanley in Gommers 2001, pp. 84-87.



18. Jan Tilens (1589-1630) and Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642)
Landscape with Two Scenes of Europa and Zeus
Oil on oak panel, 53 x 74 cm
Staatsgalerie Aschaffenburg, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich
Inv. no. 6330

did not leave much to the beholder's imagination. Ovid does not mention Europa's costume aside from her "fluttering garments".

With regard to the scene at sea, Moschos specifies how Europa holds her purple garment with her hand while her mantle flows over her shoulders like a full sail. There exists a written description of a painting with the Europa theme from about the 2nd century AD that corresponds to this part of Moschos's poem. According to this account, Europa is wearing a white tunic down to her groin and a purple robe covering the lower part of her body. With both her hands, she holds the ends of her veil, which billows out above her⁵⁰. The mention of the color purple in connection with Europa's garment is certainly no coincidence. According to the Greek myths, Europa was a Phoenician princess and Sidon and Tyre are alternately given as her hometown⁵¹. Both seaports belonged to Phoenicia (present-day Lebanon); the two small vessels and harbor in the background of the painting most certainly refer to either one of these towns. Around 1500 BC their citizens began to exploit a new source of purple known as Tyrian purple, or imperial purple, which was to become the colour of emperors, noblemen and priests⁵². Most characteristic within the pictorial tradition of Europa's abduction is, in fact, the billowing garment. For this, Maerten de Vos had both literary and visual sources to rely on, the latter going back to ancient reliefs, coins and mosaics [fig. 20]. Although a windblown fabric often serves as a pictorial device to evoke motion, in the Bilbao painting it does not seem to refer to any actual movement. Instead, it adds to the decorative appeal of the picture by counterbalancing the yellow of her garment and the green of the landscape and dramatically framing Europa's upper body.

50 Ibid., p. 83.

51 Ibid., pp. 44-45, 50.

52 Cage 1993, pp. 16-26.



19. Pablo Veronese (1528-1588)
The Rape of Europa, c. 1578
Oil on canvas, 240 x 303 cm
Palazzo Ducale, Venice

The sea on which the abduction takes place is also remarkably calm, aside from a subtle hint of frothy waves. It seems that the artist followed the “romantic” interpretation of the myth, such as the example of Moschos, but also that of Lucian of Samosata (125-180 BC). These two Hellenistic poets treat the elopement as a triumphant voyage of Europa. In his *Dialogi Marini* (Dialogues of the Sea-Gods) Lucian playfully describes the story through the eyes of Zephyros, God of the Westernwind. Zephyros witnessed the abduction at sea and gives a detailed account to Notos, Southernwind. According to Zephyros, the sea became waveless at once and “Loves” were fluttering alongside just above the sea, carrying lighted torches.⁵³ We recognize the flying putti in the Bilbao painting and one of them even holds torches in between Jupiter’s lightning bolts. Lucian also mentions the company of Neptune. The God of the Sea may not be visible in the painting at first sight, but tucked away at far left we notice a fountain featuring a river god, possibly Neptune. As far as I know, it has thus far gone unnoticed that there is even more to this fountain. The friezes adorning the base refer to the overall theme of the painting. The upper frieze shows a comparable love affair taken from the *Metamorphoses*, possibly Pan and Syrinx or Apollo and Daphne, symbolizing chastity versus lust. The lower frieze displays a horse chariot, alluding to the triumphant character of the abduction.

According to Mutsaers, texts by the Roman senator Publius Nigidius Figulus (98-45 BC) inspired De Vos to include both Neptune and a small temple in his composition⁵⁴. The fragments of Nigidius’s works tell that Neptune sent a bull to his brother Jupiter as a gift; Nigidius thereby follows earlier authors who claim that Jupiter sent this bull to bring Europa to Crete instead of transforming into one⁵⁵. The presence of the Neptune sculpture in the painting may therefore refer to this specific interpretation of the myth. With regard to the temple, Nigidius writes that Europa’s companions play in the temple of Asclepius. The circular temple

53 Gommers 2001, p. 82.

54 Mutsaers 1963, p. 64.

55 Gommers 2001, p. 46.



20. Anonymous, Roman
Coin showing *The Rape of Europa*,
1st century BC
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Inv. no. AN1971.822

in the Bilbao painting is crowned with a *quadriga*—emblem of triumph— and does not correspond to the rectangular temple of Asclepius. It could be that the artist merely sought to decorate the backdrop with fantastic architecture to evoke a classical setting, as similar round-shaped temples are found in other works by De Vos. Upon closer inspection one can discern a small procession of men and women leading a cow towards an altar in the temple. The sacrificial animal echoes the white bull in the foreground, even in the flower adornments. According to *De Dea Syria*, which has traditionally been ascribed to Lucian, the citizens of Sidon built a temple to venerate Europa after her abduction had taken place⁵⁶. De Vos may have intended this scene as an epilogue to the abduction.

The painting seems then to have three scenes, one in each of the three receding picture planes. The three-colour perspective reminds us of paintings by earlier Flemish artists such as Joachim Patinir. Less traditional, however, are the subjects that De Vos chose for both background scenes, as neither of them is conventional within the visual history of the “rape of Europa” theme. The Bilbao painting is therefore unique in the visualization of this particular myth.

Mutsaers already tentatively suggested that Maerten de Vos may have been advised on the manifold literary sources by the Antwerp cartographer Abraham Ortelius⁵⁷. Both De Vos and Ortelius were members of the Guild of Saint Luke and had been acquainted since at least 1561. Ortelius had recommended De Vos to Gillis Hooftman in the 1560s and probably also advised the artist on the design of this commission⁵⁸. Moreover, the two men collaborated when De Vos executed a series of drawings to ornament an engraved map of Canaan, published by Ortelius in 1586, with scenes from the life of Abraham⁵⁹. One could stretch the hypothesis even further by suggesting that Ortelius could possibly also have acted as an intermediary in the commission, which leads me to the provenance history of the painting.

56 Ibid., p. 51.

57 Mutsaers 1963, p. 65.

58 Zweite 1980, pp. 69-70, 282. On the subject of Ortelius as advisor on art, see Meganck 2003, pp. 200-201.

59 Bennett 1990, pp. 4-13.

Provenance

The earliest known owner of this painting was the French Count Demandolx-Dedons, whose collection of paintings, drawings, sculpture, furniture and other art objects was sold at his death in Marseille in 1916⁶⁰. He was a collector known for his particular interest in French 18th- and 19th-century art and Spanish 15th-century painting⁶¹. Nonetheless, the auction catalogue reveals an even wider taste in art, since Dutch and Flemish artworks were among the objects put on auction⁶². The painting subsequently entered the collection of the Basque millionaire don Horacio Echevarrieta, who donated it to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1919.

Despite the paucity of evidence documenting the early provenance of the painting, some remarks can be made on its possible original purpose. Mythological scenes generally adorned official buildings, guildhalls and luxurious homes of the elite. And since so much emphasis is placed on the female nude, this painting was most likely intended for the private quarters of an upper-class patron. By referring to more than one classical author as well as by quoting several pictorial sources, De Vos created a painting most suitable for a nobleman or wealthy merchant who would wish to flaunt his sophistication. Although the depiction of heathen gods was disapproved of by the Council of Trent, collectors would justify the pagan subject by assigning it a moral theme. Moralized versions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, such as Karel van Mander's *Uytlegghingh* (1604), explain how certain classical stories might be interpreted with morally edifying implications. The act of Europa's rape, in this case, was therefore to be understood symbolically. According to Van Mander: "Europa being carried out to sea represents the soul, separated from God and plunged into the troubles of this world. She gazes back with longing towards the shore, as the soul does towards its Creator"⁶³. The contemplative gaze of Europa in the Bilbao painting perfectly fits this interpretation. Of course, the Catholic Church realized that the idea of a moral subtext was also a convenient way of concealing indecent and erotic stories. Moralized versions of Ovid were in fact placed on the Index of Prohibited Books by the Council of Trent. We can imagine that besides the erudite and contemplative quality of the painting, the attractive female nude must have appealed to the original owner for other reasons as well.

When admiring the painting now in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, one is still instantly struck by the beauty of young Europa, and then, as the eye wanders across the canvas, one follows the carefully arranged details illuminating Europa's trajectory. With this painting, Maerten de Vos demonstrated his virtuosity: he brought his erudition to bear on his depiction of the narrative, comfortably drawing upon both better- and lesser-known textual sources; he applied different kinds of brushwork to different parts of the painting, with varying significance; he alluded to and emulated existing visual models from both North and South of the Alps; and finally, he merged all of this with his own innovations in the treatment of subject-matter. The result is a well-balanced composition and a beautifully executed and elegant painting that not only appeals to the eye but to connoisseurs—past and present—of the arts and classical literature.

60 Marseilles, 7 November 1916, lot 70, illustrated (Lugt 76109). I have not been able to match the Bilbao painting with any descriptions in the Getty Research Center Provenance Index for sale catalogues and archival descriptions, nor have I been able to identify the painting among the paintings with the subject of Europa listed in E. Duverger, *Antwerpse Kunstinventarissen uit de Zeventiende Eeuw*, Brussel 1984-2002.

61 Collectors Files of the Getty Research Institute, consulted online on 2 May 2014.

62 Besides the Bilbao painting, another object attributed to Maerten de Vos was included in the sale: a drawing with the subject of a *promenade*, lot 99.

63 Karel Van Mander. *Wtlegghingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ouidij Nasonis*, 1604, fol. 21a. Translation taken from D'Hulst 1974, vol. 5, p. 391.

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